

Public Hearing on SB 1012  
March 15, 2011

Chairmen Musto, Chairmen Tercyak, Senator Markley, Representative Gibbons, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to present my concerns. I am the current supervisor of the Children's Services Division at BESB, having been with the agency for over 20 years. I am here to voice my opposition to Senate Bill 1012. Under the governor's plan, BESB will no longer exist, and the funding and staff for the divisions will move to other agencies. I know that this bill is a well-intentioned effort to cut costs while maintaining services, but I strongly believe that separating Children's Services from the adult divisions will result in negative consequences and lost services.

I would like to begin by calling your attention to Sec. 10-294 of the CT General Statutes, passed in July 2003. The statute states in part: "The executive director shall be a person who has background, training or education related to services for the blind." By separating the divisions of BESB and re-assigning them under larger agencies, services for individuals who are blind will be taking a giant step backward. One need only look at the accomplishments of BESB in the last 8 years to be convinced that leadership with background and training in blindness has been of benefit to the students we serve as well as to the state of CT. Without an increase in state-appropriated funds, Children's Services has grown significantly. We have been able to increase the number of certified vision professionals to provide direct services to children. At the same time this has led to an increase in the number of in-service trainings for local school district personnel and the introduction of new programs addressing the expanded core curriculum for our students. Again, all this has been accomplished without any increase in the state appropriated funds. Through the efforts of leadership with experience, education and training in blindness, as is now required under 10-294, our funding has been re-focused to ensure the dollars serve the direct vision-related needs of our children. It took good management and an understanding of the needs of the blind to achieve these gains. Neither the Department of Social Services nor the State Department of Education can provide this leadership as required under 10-294. Leadership can make or break program implementation. Regardless of the number of professional staff transferred to the SDE, or the amount of funding allotted for children who are blind, we will lack the visionary leadership of an individual whose sole mission is to serve the blind. The crucial services for children with visual impairments will be buried within a larger agency. While the State Department of Education might seem like a good match and an ideal resting place for these services, that is not the case.

The State Department of Education is responsible for distributing funds to the state's 166 school districts. Will they remain committed to utilizing funds to maintain personnel to serve the blind, or will they decide to turn this funding over to the towns and require them to provide their own services? The last time there

was a proposal to move Children's Services funding to SDE, that was exactly what the Commissioner stated would be done. Will the SDE find it a conflict of interest to retain one division to serve the blind when their stated mission is "to ensure equal opportunity and excellence in education for all Connecticut students"?

As the Children's Services supervisor, I regularly network with my counterparts throughout New England. I am well aware of the difficulties faced by states where there are no centralized services. Towns who cannot find a certified Teacher of the Visually Impaired are unable to provide for the needs of students with vision loss. Imagine your child entering school and you as a parent are promised that the district is doing everything they can to find a teacher to teach your child to read. Imagine that your child goes for six months, or even a year without those services because recruitment of a qualified teacher fails to yield a viable candidate. Without the services of a TVI to provide instruction in Braille, a child who cannot read print is unable to access the curriculum offered in their local district. Yet this happens routinely when districts are left on their own to provide resources for this low incidence disability. In CT today, no eligible child goes unserved. Should we ask the parents of CT children who are blind to relinquish the guarantee that their child will receive the specialized services they need? Please reject Bill 1012 and maintain the safety net that has been there for the blind for over a century.

Thank you for your time.

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